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### Self and personal-identity: A Philosophical analysis after Hume and Kant

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#### Abstract:

*The study of self and personal identity has been a fundamental subject of philosophical inquiry, and two prominent philosophers, David Hume and Immanuel Kant, have presented contrasting perspectives on this complex topic. Hume's no-self theory challenges the existence of a fixed, enduring self, suggesting that the self is merely a bundle of perceptions and experiences woven together by associative habits. Hume treated the self as illusion. On the other hand, Kant's transcendental self-theory posits that the self is a necessary condition for experiencing the world and serves as the unifying center of consciousness. Kant's theory posits the self as an a priori condition for experiencing the world. It seems that both of these theories are opposite or contradictory to each other. On the other hand it is also noticeable the Humean no-self theory and Kantian transcendental self-theory denied the traditional notion of self-i.e. self is a simple substance. So we will have seen that these two theories opposite as well as similar to each other in some aspects. This paper will elaborate on whether both of these theories are self-consistent in terms of their opposite characteristics or they can stand in parallel for similarities.*

**Keyword:** personal identity, No-self, Transcendental unity, substance, consciousness.

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**Introduction:** The study of self and personal identity has been a central and enduring topic of philosophical inquiry, engaging thinkers throughout history. The paragraph explores the concept of "personal identity," breaking down its components and delving into various theories that attempt to explain how a person remains the same individual over time. It begins by emphasizing the connection between the terms "personal" and "identity," derived from the concept of a "person." The discussion focuses on the uniqueness of personal identity, highlighting the role of self-consciousness, reasoning, and reflection in distinguishing individuals. Logical conditions for considering two objects identical, emphasizing spatio-temporal continuity. It then contrasts qualitative identity (changing descriptive properties) with numerical identity (unchanging essence), asserting that the latter is crucial for maintaining a coherent understanding of oneself over time. There are three criteria of personal identity: the Body Theory, Soul Theory, and Psychological Continuity Theory. The Body Theory suggests sameness based on a shared physical body but overlooks changes over time. The Soul Theory ties identity to an unchanging soul,

presenting challenges related to verifying its existence. The Psychological Continuity Theory posits that personal identity relies on the continuity of memories and consciousness, providing a more experiential approach. On the other hand what a person is, describing a person as a mental being with self-consciousness, world-directed mental states, and self-reflective mental states. Self-consciousness emerges as a key factor in shaping experiences, memories, plans, and social interactions, underscoring its role in personal identity.

Immanuel Kant and David Hume, two influential Enlightenment-era philosophers, are present contrasting perspectives on the nature of the self. Hume's no-self theory challenges the existence of a fixed, enduring self, proposing that the self is a mere bundle of perceptions and experiences woven together by associative habits. In contrast, Kant's transcendental self-theory posits that the self is a necessary condition for experiencing the world, serving as the unifying center of consciousness. The aim of this research article is to conduct a comprehensive comparative analysis of the Humean and Kantian self-theories, exploring their fundamental concepts, implications, and areas of contrast and overlap. By examining these two philosophical viewpoints, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of human consciousness and personal identity. In this article, we will first provide a background on the historical significance of self-theories and the philosophical context in which Hume and Kant developed their ideas. We will then outline the specific research question that guides this comparative analysis. In the comparative section, we will highlight the contrasts between the Humean and Kantian self-theories. These contrasts will include the nature of the self, sources of knowledge and implications for personal identity and responsibility. Next, we will identify overlapping themes that both theories address, such as the continuity of consciousness and practical identity. We will examine how these notions reconcile apparent disparities and contribute to our understanding of selfhood.

**Humean view on self and identity:** I will focus on the Humean concept of self which is discussed in the section “*Of Personal Identity*” in ‘*Treatise of Human Nature*.’ Here Hume also discusses the problem of personal identity. At the core of Hume's self-theory is the bundle theory of the self. According to this theory, the self is not an independently existing entity, but rather a bundle or collection of perceptions and mental states. There is no substantial and enduring self-underlying our experiences, but instead, the self is a product of the mind's tendency to associate various perceptions together. As he said “we are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement” (*Treatise* 252). Hume said, there are some philosophers, “who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our Self; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity” (*Treatise* 252). Hume denies the existing concept of substantial self altogether. He said, “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or the other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch myself at any time without perception; never observe

anything but the perception.”<sup>1</sup> Hume argues that when we introspect, we find a succession of fleeting impressions and ideas, but no unchanging self. He points out that what we perceive as a continuous self is the result of our mental habit of associating these perceptions based on resemblance, contiguity, and cause-and-effect. These associations create the illusion of a unified and coherent self, but there is no underlying substance that persists through time. According to Hume, the self that we perceive as a continuous entity is a result of the mind’s tendency to associate various perceptions together. These associations are based on three principles: resemblance, contiguity, and cause-and-effect. For example, we associate our experiences of seeing a sunrise with our emotions of joy, creating the illusion of a unified self-experiencing these events. However, Hume contends that there is no underlying substance that persists through time.

Hume’s no-self theory has significant implications for the concept of personal identity. According to his theory, personal identity is not based on an enduring substance or fixed self, but rather on the continuous flow of perceptions and mental states. The “I” that we refer to is a result of the association of various experiences and does not refer to a permanent entity.

This view challenges traditional notions of personal identity as an unchanging and indivisible self. Hume’s theory suggests that personal identity is a constantly changing and evolving process, shaped by the ongoing stream of perceptions and experiences. As a result, it becomes challenging to pinpoint the exact nature of personal identity over time. He said there are two types of error that contribute to the concept of self. The first error involves viewing the self as substance. According Hume in the context of substance there are three definition which are [A substance is] “An unknown something in which our perception supposed to inhere” (*Treatise*16).

2. [A substance is] “Something which may exist by itself” (*Treatise* 16).

3. [A substance is] “A collection of particular qualities” (*Treatise* 252).

Hume rejected these three definitions as we have no impression regarding this definition. Hume argues that perceptions and impressions exist independently, forming a continuous and rapidly changing flux. The mind, according to Hume, is merely a collection of perceptions falsely endowed with simplicity and identity. The first error is equating self with this perceptual flux. The second error is mistaking the connectedness of perceptions for the existence of a self. Hume questions the source of the concept of identity, highlighting the inconsistency of perceptions in the mind. He explores the inclination to ascribe identity to changing perceptions and wonders why we have a strong tendency to believe in an unchanging existence throughout our lives. As Hume says “Identity depends on the relation of ideas and all these relations produce identity, by means of that that easy transition they occasion” (*Treatise* 262). Hume contends that the identity attributed to the mind is a fiction, a product of imagination that unites distinct perceptions through three laws of association: resemblance, causation, and memory.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 252.

**Resemblance:** Hume explains that memories of past perceptions are retained in the mind, forming a chain of thought by connecting similar perceptions. This connection through resemblance creates the notion of identity, as we recognize these perceptions as related to the same object or experience.

**Causation:** The relationship of cause and effect links different perceptions, allowing the mind to undergo changes in character, disposition, and ideas without losing identity. Hume likens the soul to a republic, where various members are connected by the ties of government and subordination, giving rise to continuous changes without disrupting identity.

**Memory:** Hume asserts that memory is the ultimate source of personal identity. Without memory, there would be no understanding of cause and effect, as personal identity relies on the relationship between past and present events. Memory not only establishes personal identity but also connects the cause-and-effect relationship among perceptions, helping us comprehend the interconnectedness of events and experiences over time.

Hume acknowledges the ambiguity of personal identity, suggesting it should be viewed as a grammatical problem rather than a philosophical one. Disputes about the identity of connected objects are deemed verbal by Hume. In exploring examples of identity, Hume rejects a fixed criterion and suggests that identity varies from object to object. For instance, a church undergoing complete changes can still be considered identical, while a tea cup with a broken handle may not retain its identity. Stroud raises concerns about Hume's inability to explain why certain perceptions are available to one person but not to others, leaving the origin of the idea of self or mind mysterious and unintelligible. Hume's explanation, according to Stroud, lacks clarity regarding why perceptions present themselves in personal bundles despite being distinct and separate.

Furthermore, Hume's no-self theory raises questions about the nature of responsibility. If there is no fixed and enduring self, can individuals be held accountable for their actions over time? Hume's theory does not negate the practical reality of personal identity in everyday life, but it does prompt a reconsideration of the traditional concept of responsibility based on an unchanging self. Hume's bundle theory of the self-challenges traditional notions of personal identity by proposing that the self is not an enduring substance but a bundle of perceptions and associations. This empiricist and skeptical perspective challenges the Idea of a continuous and fixed self, raising questions about the nature of personal identity and its implications for responsibility. Hume's no-self theory remains a thought-provoking exploration into the complexities of human consciousness and the nature of selfhood.

In the absence of an enduring self, it becomes challenging to pinpoint what constitutes personal identity over time. Hume argues that we do not have a continuous and indivisible self that unifies all our experiences; rather, personal identity is the result of the association of various experiences in our memory. This view challenges the conventional understanding

of personal identity as an unchanging entity. Instead, it suggests that personal identity is more fluid and dynamic, shaped by the ongoing stream of perceptions and experiences. As a result, the question of what makes a person the same individual over time becomes more complex and nuanced. Furthermore, Hume's no-self theory raises questions about moral responsibility. If there is no fixed and enduring self, can individuals be held accountable for their actions over time? This aspect of Hume's theory has sparked debates and reflections on the nature of responsibility and moral agency.

Critics argue that Hume's no-self theory may lead to a dissolution of personal responsibility, as there is no permanent self to be held accountable for past actions. However, defenders of Hume's theory maintain that while there may not be an enduring self, individuals still possess a practical identity that allows them to function in society and be responsible for their actions in a practical sense.

**Kantian Theory of self and personal identity:** Immanuel Kant's philosophical system is founded on transcendental idealism, which seeks to reconcile the rationalist and empiricist approaches to knowledge. According to Kant, human knowledge is not solely derived from sensory experience or pure reason. Instead, he proposes that knowledge is the result of an interaction between the mind and the external world. Kant's epistemology distinguishes between "phenomena" and "noumena." Phenomena are the appearances of things as they appear to us in our sensory experience, while noumena are the things-in-themselves, beyond our perceptual understanding. Kant argues that our knowledge is limited to the realm of phenomena, as we can never grasp the true nature of noumena.

Kant's exploration of subjectivity aimed to unravel the mysteries surrounding the nature of the self. He initiated this quest by critiquing his predecessors, dedicating a section in his *Critique* to scrutinize their perspectives. In this endeavor, Kant introduced three paralogisms, each adopting the form of a categorical syllogism. While these logical inferences appeared sound, Kant contended that they yielded not knowledge but an illusion thereof.

The first paralogism, "that, the representation of which is the absolute subject of our judgments and cannot therefore be employed as determination of another thing is substance. I, as a thinking being, am the absolute subject of all my possible judgments, and this representation of myself cannot be employed as predicate of any other thing. Therefore, I, as a thinking being (soul), am substance" (*Critique*, A348). Asserted that the soul, or the "I" as a thinking entity, could be immediately understood through reason. Descartes posited the self as a substance—an absolute subject inherently incapable of determining or explaining other entities. Kant challenged this notion, contending that the definition of substance as an absolute subject only held validity in the realm of logical representation and could solely be applied to intuitions. Lacking direct intuitions or sensory experiences of the soul, Kant argued against conclusively defining it as a substance, maintaining that deductions about the nature of the soul were inherently inconclusive.

The second paralogism, “That, the action of which can never be regarded as the concurrence of several things acting, is *simple*. Now the soul, or the thinking ‘I’, is such a being. Therefore, etc.”(*Critique* 350). contended that the soul is a simple being, indivisible and not composed of parts. Kant refuted this claim by identifying a flaw in reasoning. It mistakenly equated the unity of apperception with the indivisible unity of a non-material substance—the self. Kant argued that simplicity, as attributed to the soul, was an immediate expression of apperception, signifying the mind's awareness of its thoughts and experiences. Kant disputed that the simplicity of the soul did not imply indivisibility and was not inferred from the statement "I think." In essence, Kant dismantled Descartes' arguments, offering a nuanced perspective on the complexity of self-awareness and the limitations of deducing the nature of the soul.

In the third paralogism, Kant addresses the claim that consciousness of numerical identity over time establishes the soul as a person—a substance with enduring self-awareness. Kant stated “That which is conscious of the numerical identity of itself at different times is in so far a *person*. Now the soul is conscious, etc. Therefore it is a person” (*Critique* 357). This argument posits that the soul, as an immaterial entity, embodies personal identity. However, Kant counters this by asserting that the paralogism confuses the numerical identity of the "I" (the consistency of the "I" in apperception over time) with the permanence of the soul itself. Kant's explanation delves into the complexity of the paralogism, highlighting a fundamental misconception about permanence. He distinguishes between two concepts of permanence: external permanence, related to empirical observation of an object in time, and internal permanence, linked to the sameness or identity of the "I" in apperception. The paralogism erroneously equates these distinct forms of permanence.

When Kant discusses the "identity of person" in consciousness, he refers to the consistent encounter with the same sense of "I" during introspection. This continuity is facilitated by the unity of apperception, allowing the "I" to persist over time. However, the mistake lies in attributing permanence as a property of the "I" itself. Kant points out that the term "I" can accompany any thought at a given moment, leading to a subjective experience of continuity. This flexibility in associating the concept of "I" with experiences may lead to the misconception that the formal principle of temporal unity within consciousness is evidence of a permanent entity. In essence, Kant argues that the subjective sense of continuity in consciousness should not be conflated with the objective permanence of the soul, emphasizing the fallacy in equating these two notions within the context of the third paralogism.

The self-identity of the transcendental subject, Kant argues, is grounded in the awareness of the synthesis of representations. This synthesis, stemming from the transcendental unity of apperception, forms the logical basis for all conceivable inferences, including those pertaining to cause and effect. In response to Hume's skepticism about establishing necessary relations without direct impressions, Kant introduces the concept of synthesis as a

fundamental relationship. The transcendental self, endowed with the capacity for synthesis and consciousness, becomes the bedrock of our understanding of necessary relations.

Kant posits that our empirical self is composed of a bundle of various sensory information, representing our experiences and perceptions within the physical world. This bundle, associated with our empirical self, is shaped by the transcendental unity of apperception. It is this unity that enables the formation of coherent and unified self-consciousness, allowing us to organize and comprehend the diverse perceptions we encounter. In essence, Kant's framework reconciles the empirical aspects of our sensory experiences with the transcendental structures that underpin our ability to synthesize information, providing a nuanced understanding of self, identity, and the basis for our comprehension of causal relationships in the world.

**Comparison between Hume and Kant:** After “Critique of Pure Reason,” Kant’s transcendental self-theory maintains its distinction from Hume’s no-self theory. Kant argues that the transcendental self is a necessary condition for experience, providing unity and coherence to our consciousness. The transcendental self is constant and unchanging, allowing for a coherent notion of personal identity that persists over time. Hume’s no-self theory, on the other hand, continues to reject the existence of an enduring and fixed self. He maintains that personal identity is not based on a permanent substance but a constantly changing process of associating perceptions. According to Hume, there is no single and unified self that underlies our experiences.

**Implications for Personal Identity and Responsibility:** After their respective works, Kant’s transcendental self-theory and Hume’s no-self theory continue to have distinct implications for personal identity and responsibility. Kant’s transcendental self-theory provides a robust foundation for personal identity and moral responsibility. The transcendental self, as the unifying and rational agent, serves as the basis for moral autonomy. Kant’s ethics, centered on the categorical imperative, emphasizes that individuals should act in accordance with universal moral principles, grounded in their rational capacity. This notion of moral responsibility stems from the transcendental self’s role in moral deliberation and decision-making,

Hume’s no-self theory, with its rejection of an enduring self, raises questions about the nature of personal identity and its implications for responsibility. Critics argue that Hume’s theory may challenge the conventional basis for moral responsibility, as it questions the idea of a permanent self that is accountable for actions over time. However, defenders of Hume’s theory maintain that individuals still possess a practical identity that allows them to function in society and be responsible for their actions in a practical sense, despite the absence of an enduring self.

In both Humean and Kantian self-theories, memory plays a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of consciousness. While their theories differ in their characterization of the self, both acknowledge the importance of memory in shaping our sense of personal identity and past experiences. For Hume, the self is a collection of perceptions and experiences that

are linked together through associative habits. Memory, as a chain of associated ideas, is a key factor in this process of association. When we recall past experiences, the mind naturally links them to the present, contributing to the illusion of continuity and coherence in the stream of consciousness. However, Hume recognizes that memory is not infallible, and there may be gaps or errors in our recollections, which can affect the sense of a continuous self.

Kant's transcendental self-theory posits a necessary and unchanging self as the unifying subject of experience. Memory, in this context, allows us to maintain the continuity of consciousness over time. The transcendental apperception, the self-awareness that accompanies all mental activities, ensures that we recognize ourselves as the same thinking subject throughout our experiences. This self-awareness, combined with memory, provides a constant and unchanging identity over time.

**Conclusion:** In the preceding discussion, it becomes evident that, akin to Hume, Kant rejected the idea of the self as a substance. Furthermore, Kant diverged from endorsing the theory of a permanent self. However, it is noteworthy that Kant maintained a nuanced position, suggesting that adhering solely to Hume's notion of the self as a fiction would undermine the possibility of presenting sensible knowledge. This is because sensible knowledge, though empirical in its nature, possesses an a priori aspect. Kant's departure from considering the self as a substance aligns with Hume's skepticism, challenging the traditional view of the self as a fixed and enduring entity. Moreover, by rejecting the concept of a permanent self, Kant refutes the idea of an unchanging, essence associated with personal identity.

However, Kant introduces a crucial nuance by highlighting the inadequacy of adopting a purely Humean perspective on the self as a fiction. He points out that such a stance would impede the presentation of the possibility of sensible knowledge. The reason behind this lies in the nature of sensible knowledge, which is empirical and derived from experience, but simultaneously possesses an a priori element. By acknowledging the empirical aspect of knowledge, Kant recognizes the role of sensory experience in shaping our understanding of the world. Yet, he emphasizes that there is an inherent structure or framework (a priori) that shapes and organizes our sensory experiences, allowing for meaningful knowledge to emerge.

In essence, Kant's position underscores the delicate balance between empirical and a priori elements in understanding the self and knowledge. While challenging conventional notions of substance and permanence, he seeks a middle ground that accommodates both empirical experiences and the a priori structures necessary for coherent and meaningful knowledge. Kant's concept of self-delves into the intricacies of identity and addresses the challenge posed by Hume regarding causality. According to Kant, the transcendental unity of apperception is the corner point that imparts identity to the ever-changing array of perceptions. This unity allows us to perceive and recognize the self as a unified and



continuous entity. Contrary to viewing the transcendental self as a mere collection of perceptions, Kant asserts that it is the self-identical "I" that assumes the role of a subject.

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